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THE LAST OF THE IROQUOIS POTTERS

BY

M. R. HARRINGTON

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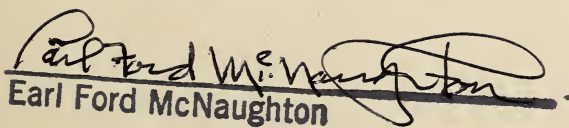
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## THE LAST OF THE IROQUOIS POTTERS

BY M. R. HARRINGTON

The ceramic art of the New York Iroquois has long been obsolete. Although the knowledge that their ancestors manufactured vessels of clay still persists among them, none of the technical details remains, so far as I have been able to discover, even in tradition. For this reason I have long been interested in the reported survival of the potters' craft among the Eastern Cherokee<sup>1</sup> who are known to be Iroquoian in language and to have resembled in culture, to a certain extent, the Iroquois of the north. Here, thought I, may be an opportunity to throw light on questions which have long puzzled New York archeologists and to put on record a first-hand account of the art in which the Five Nations had developed such proficiency.

My opportunity came in July 1908, when in connection with my anthropological work for Mr George G. Heye of New York I visited the Cherokee settlements in western North Carolina for the purpose of collecting ethnological specimens.

Before starting I received many helpful hints from Mr James Mooney who has made the Eastern Cherokee an object of special study; thus I was enabled to know approximately what to expect before arriving on the ground. After securing an interpreter I began to make inquiries about pottery, and soon discovered that a number of families still kept a few pieces for their own use, or as mementoes of the old days. As a rule I was able to secure these, but in some cases neither money nor persuasion had any effect—the owners remained obdurate. Nevertheless a very fair collection was secured, comprising specimens of various ages, sizes and uses.

Three principal forms may be distinguished in modern Cherokee ware, as represented by the collection secured for Mr Heye: the large jar (ũ<sup>n</sup> tĩ<sup>n</sup>), the pot (tũ stĩ<sup>n</sup>) and the bowl (de wa Lĩ<sup>n</sup>). The jars are usually 12 to 16 inches high and average about 8 inches in diameter. Generally these are provided with a flat bottom from which the sides bulge slightly, contracting again toward the rim. Such vessels are usually covered with stamped designs applied with a carved paddle, but no free-hand incised decoration was seen. The name ũ<sup>n</sup> tĩ<sup>n</sup> while specifically applied to these large

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<sup>1</sup>Holmes. *Aboriginal Pottery of Eastern U. S.* p. 52.

jars, is often used as a generic term for any sort of pottery. Soup, cooked hominy and other foods are kept in such vessels. With the exception of the flat bottom which may be a comparatively recent adaptation to facilitate standing on shelves and tables, this form may well be of aboriginal origin, but bears a greater resemblance to what the New York archeologist would call the Algonquin rather than the Iroquoian type.

A distinct resemblance to Iroquois pottery may be observed in the pots, which often show, to a greater or less extent, a rounded bottom, spheroidal body and constricted neck sometimes surmounted by a projecting rim or collar, all of which features are characteristic of Iroquois ware. The rim is sometimes even decorated with notches, dots and simple incised lines, which add to the Iroquois effect as in the jars the body is frequently covered with stamped paddle patterns. Such pots were formerly employed for general cooking purposes but have been recently used more for stewing fruit than anything else. The height of the modern specimens is generally under 8 inches, but in former times larger ones were made. One small vessel of this type was provided with handles of modern design.

Bowls are variable as to size and various as to use; some are round bottomed, some flat, some stamped, some plain; but the rims of all the bowls collected were invariably more or less flaring, not bent sharply inward as in many Muskogean and some modern Catawba specimens. Similar flaring bowls are occasionally found on northern Iroquois sites. The only saucerlike form seen was made, the Indians told me, in imitation of white man's ware. When baking a batch of pottery the old Cherokees were accustomed to put in a lot of little toy vessels, dolls and animals modeled in clay, which were greatly appreciated by the children. Crude clay pipes were also made, and these too were reproduced in miniature as toys. Such toy vessels, figurines and pipes are not infrequently unearthed from ancient Iroquois sites in New York.

Mr Mooney had given me the name of one potter, Iwi Katâlsta, and I lost no time in making her acquaintance. Inquiry resulted in the discovery of but one more, an aged woman known as Jennie Arch, whose feeble hands had all but lost their skill. For this reason I confined myself almost entirely to Iwi's methods of pottery making. Fully half the pottery I secured from the Eastern Cherokees is said to be the work of her hand.

Her tools were few, and with one exception simple, consisting of a hammerstone for pounding the clay, a sharpened bit of stick



for making lines and notches, and a fine grained, waterworn pebble for smoothing, showing the polish of long use. The exception is the carved paddle for stamping the pottery—a broad bladed wooden affair about 8 inches long, carefully carved to produce a checkerwork pattern when struck against soft clay. More paddles were later collected bearing different figures, some quite complex. Other accessories were a common axe, a bucket of water, a low sided wooden tray for kneading clay and a flat oval piece of wood used as a stand to build large jars upon and provided with a handle at either end for convenience in turning; some saucers of china or gourd, and some pieces of cotton sheeting.

After Iwi Katâlsta had dug her clay from a bed on Soco creek, the exact location of which she did not seem inclined to reveal, she was accustomed to mold it into a cake some 14 inches long, resembling in form a loaf of bread, in which shape it was dried and laid away for future use. When we visited her home at "Yellow Hill" [pl. 1] and requested her to make us some pottery she broke off the end of this cake and proceeded to pulverize it on her hearthstone, using the back of a common axe as a crushing instrument. In old times, she explained, a "long rock" was used for this purpose.

When sufficiently pulverized the clay was placed in a wooden tray, moistened and again thoroughly pounded [pl. 2]. This time Iwi used a hammerstone which she kept especially to crush hickory nuts, but which she often used in place of the axe in pounding the dampened clay. From time to time the mass was kneaded and a little more water or dry clay added as seemed necessary to obtain the required consistency. Sometimes, I was informed, a fine sand was added at this stage as a tempering material; but in this case it was omitted. Iwi had a vessel of the pot form in mind. Taking a large handful of the clay she patted it into a ball which she took in both hands and pressing her thumbs deeply into one side, began to turn it rapidly [pl. 3]. In a surprisingly short time a small bowl with fairly thin sides was produced to serve as a base for the future vessel. During this process she had taken care to keep her hands wet. Then supporting the inside of the bowl with the fingers of her left hand she struck it sharply on the outside with her carved paddle, slightly turning the embryo vessel before each stroke and moistening the paddle now and then in a vessel of water which stood near. The bowl-shaped base was then carefully laid upon a bit of cotton cloth resting on a common china saucer. When questioned as to what the Indians

used before saucers were available, Iwi replied through the interpreter, that she had heard that for large vessels the base was set in a hole in the sand lined with some sort of cloth, the sand being often inclosed in a basket for convenience. For small vessels, she said, a saucer made of gourd was just as serviceable as one of china, and as I liked the old style, she would take care to use gourd supports hereafter in making pottery for me. It was her custom, she continued, when making the large, flat-bottomed hominy jars to set the base on the oval, flat utensil of wood before mentioned, especially made for the purpose and provided with a handle at either end to facilitate turning.

The bowl-shaped base having been safely ensconced in the saucer she pinched its edges thin with wet fingers; then, rapidly rolling out a lump of clay on a plank into a long thin cylinder [pl. 4] she applied it just inside the rim of the base and projecting above it about half its width, pinching it fast the while until the circuit was completed [pl. 5]. The coil proved a bit too long, so she broke the superfluous piece off and blended the two ends together with care. Then by careful pinching and smoothing with wet fingers and finger nails the coil was blended with the bowl-shaped base and thinned at the top to receive another coil which was also applied inside. The object of applying each coil inside instead of directly on top of the preceding was to produce strength by overlapping. Thus the coiling proceeded until the required form and height were reached, when the rim coil was applied outside the one beneath. After being blended in the usual way this was pinched into lateral protuberances, and notched, dotted or marked with a sharpened stick to suit the fancy [pl. 8]. After each coil had been applied and blended the vessel was allowed to dry and harden a few minutes before the next one was added; and after the jar had received its shape it was allowed to become quite firm before the final stamping was applied.

It will be remembered that the base of the vessel had already been stamped before being placed in the saucer, so it was now only necessary to strike the body briskly with the wet paddle until the surface was covered with its imprints [pl. 6]. In one jar the stamping was complete before the rim was added. After stamping the vessel was set away to dry.

The fact that Iwi used no tools except the paddle, the marking stick and her fingers seemed remarkable to me, in view of the numerous smoothing tools of gourd, shell and wood employed by

the Catawba.<sup>1</sup> Inquiry revealed the fact that while they had apparently never heard of gourd smoothers, the Cherokee formerly used mussel shells and a marine shell, probably some species of *cardium* for this purpose. Iwi herself sometimes used a chip of wood in making large vessels.

After drying—a process that takes from one to three days, depending on the weather—the vessel was carefully rubbed and polished on the inside, and on the outside whenever necessary [pl. 7] with the smoothing stone kept wet by continual dipping in water.

When a number of vessels had been made and dried the next step was to prop the vessels up on their sides around the fire, mouth toward the blaze, until a faint brown color, beginning near the fire crept over the whole of the vessels—a sign that they were hot enough for firing. Then the potter, with a long stick, rolled them over mouth down upon the embers [pl. 9] and covered them with pieces of dry bark to the depth of 2 or 3 inches. Making sure that the bark had caught fire all around [pl. 10] she left them to their fate. About an hour later the bark had burned away leaving the rounded bottoms of the pots protruding through the ashes. Then, taking her long hooked stick, Iwi rolled the vessels from the fire, tapping them sharply to detect cracks. If a vessel rang clear it was perfect.

“In order to be good for cooking, these pots should be smoked,” she said. “If this is not done the water will soak through.” So she dropped a handful of bran in each one while they were still almost red-hot, stirred it with her stick, tipped the pots this way and that, and finally, turning out the now blazing bran from each in turn, inverted the vessels upon it. In this way the inside was smoked black and rendered impervious and this without leaving any odor of smoke in the vessels when they became cold. Generally, Iwi told me, corncobs were employed for this purpose, but she always used bran when cobs were not available. This probably explains the black color of the inner surface so often seen in New York aboriginal pottery.

I was told that in later times the firing has been generally done indoors, because an absolutely still day was necessary for a successful burning in the open air, any breeze being liable to crack the vessels. The firing of my pottery was, however, done out of

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<sup>1</sup> Harrington. Catawba Potters and their Work. *Am. Anthropology*, Sept. 1908.



doors, the fire being built on a rude hearth of flat stones sunk level with the ground.

It seems probable from the evidence at my disposal<sup>1</sup> that similar methods were once used by the New York Iroquois in making pottery. As before mentioned the form of many Cherokee vessels is quite like the style we know as Iroquois. Similar rims are found in western and northern New York, as are potsherds showing the overlapped method of coiling, while from the ash pits on the early Mohawk site known as "Garoga" in Fulton county, New York I have unearthened with my own hands pottery bearing the impress of the checkerwork paddle.

But the ancient pottery of the Cherokee embraced forms still more like the Iroquois styles than are those of modern make, if we can judge by the specimens found near the "Town House Mound" at Yellow Hill on the Eastern Cherokee Reservation — a mound which the Cherokee claim was made by their ancestors. The pieces of rim and the single perfect vessel would not be considered intrusive or imported if found on an ancient Onondaga site in Jefferson county, New York. They show not only the spheroidal body, constricted mouth and projecting rim or collar, but also exhibit a well developed neck of true Iroquois style which is not clearly marked in the recent ware of the Cherokee.

The carved paddle for decorating pottery seems to have become obsolete among the Iroquois at an early date, for potsherds showing its use are rarely if ever found on their later sites so far as my knowledge goes. But such potsherds are not seen as a rule on New York sites once occupied by Algonquin tribes, so it is probable that here we have another link connecting the northern Iroquois with the Cherokee. The blowgun, the nearly universal possession of the southeastern tribes, seems also to have been peculiar to the Iroquois in the north. Possibly such apparent trifles may help us to trace the migrations of the Iroquois before they reached the region of Lake Erie and the St Lawrence.

It was perhaps fortunate that I was able to go to North Carolina when I did, for Iwa Katâlsta is old, and her health is failing, while Jennie Arch can no longer make pottery worthy of the name. The younger generation does not care, apparently, for pottery making, and the western Cherokees, from all I can learn, have abandoned the art. Hence it is probable that a few more years will see the last of the Iroquoian potters.

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<sup>1</sup> Iroquois Industries.



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Plate 1



Home of the Cherokee potter



Plate 2



Pounding clay for pottery





Plate 3



Molding the bottom of a vessel



Plate 4



Rolling the coil of clay preparatory to making a pottery vessel





Plate 5



Applying a coil to the pot base



Plate 6



The use of the stamping paddle



Plate 7



The polishing stone in use





Plate 8



Decorating the vessel



Plate 9



Arranging the vessels for firing





Plate 10



Firing the clay vessels





